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ABSTRACT

One approach of the peace movement has been the development of peace education course in schools and universities. This paper is an evaluation of the effects of one such course on the beliefs and attitudes of students. Two evaluations were done, one in the spring of 1988 and one in the winter of 1990. University students enrolled in a course titled, "National Security: Its Science and Technology," were assessed before and after the term and compared to a control group of students. Differences were found between the 1988 and 1990 groups of students, possibly due to the shift in world power positions. The primary effect of the course was to increase students' cognitive differentiation among related issues such as nuclear weapons, nuclear power, war, and SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative). Significant patterns of differences also were found between male and female students. A 7-item list of references is included. (Author/DB)

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ABSTRACT

One approach to the peace movement has been the development of peace education courses in schools and universities. This paper is an evaluation of the effects of one such course on the beliefs and attitudes of students. Two evaluations were done, one in the spring of 1988 and one in the winter of 1990. University students in a course on National Security: Its Science and Technology were assessed before and after the term and compared to control students. Differences were found between the 1988 and 1990 groups of students, possibly due to the shift in world power positions. The primary effect of the course was to increase students' cognitive differentiation among related issues such as nuclear weapons, nuclear power, war, and SDI. Significant patterns of differences were also found between male and female students.

The development and first use of nuclear weapons on a civilian population in 1945 marked a watershed in the world's approach to war and peace. Peace education programs in schools, disarmament and test-ban treaties, the assessment of public attitudes about armed conflict, all are primarily phenomena of the latter half of the twentieth century. The existence of a nuclear option has made us more sensitive to the underlying social and psychological dynamics of war and the arms race.

Recent theoretical work has highlighted the mythology and the psychodynamics of the nuclear age. Melman (1982) states that the arms race will not be reversed until the misconceptions that military power and production resources are unlimited have been discredited. (He describes the popular belief that wars stimulate the economy as the "guns create butter" fallacy.) Zur (1989) adds three more myths: war is part of human nature, decent people are basically peaceful and seek to avoid war because it is evil, and war is a male institution which holds no appeal for women. Both authors feel that a first step toward peace must include confronting this mythology which provides a basic rationale for conflict.

Other researchers have produced psychodynamic interpretations of prevailing attitudes about nuclear conflict. DeMause (1986) feels that Americans share a group fantasy that the United States must atone for sinful behavior by engaging in a sacrificial war against enemies, who are portrayed as especially vulnerable to attack expressed via homosexual imagery. And in an analysis of former President Reagan's Star Wars speech, Elovitz et al. (1985) found themes of weakness, especially male sexual vulnerability, and aggression as the method of repairing that weakness and regaining potency.

An illustration of this can be seen in the imagery surrounding President Bush's decision to send United States troops and aircraft to Saudi Arabia in response to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. On the day that these troop movements were begun, former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane agreed that the President had effectively "drawn a line in the sand" and challenged Iraq to step over it (MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, August 7, 1990). Senator Richard Lugar concurred, adding that the risks were great, but that failure to act would cause the United States to appear "impotent".

These are uncomfortable images. Lifton (1982) speaks of "nuclear numbing" and Wagner (1985) of psychic discomfort as a reaction to the threat of a nuclear exchange. Doctor et al. (1987) found that teenagers who worried a great deal about nuclear war were better emotionally adjusted than were less worried teens, suggesting that concern about nuclear war is reality-based and not merely reflective of a general tendency to fret.

Social and psychological efforts to reduce the risk of nuclear war have centered around increasing the availability and flow of information. While the counseling function is still seen as essential to countering the fears produced by nuclear threat, a major focus has been placed on increasing the public's level of knowledge about these issues.

The literature on formal peace education coursework in the schools is scanty, but growing. Programs in the United States and abroad have been developed, but unfortunately, they have rarely been systematically evaluated. The purpose of this paper is to present such an empirical analysis.

Subjects in Study 1 were 22 undergraduate university students enrolled in a course titled "National Security: Its Science and Technology" (experimental group) and 85 students enrolled in an introductory psychology course (control group). Study 2 used 37 and 67 students in the two groups. Study 1 was done in the spring of 1988, Study 2 in the winter of 1990. All subjects completed a questionnaire during the first week and again during the final week of the ten-week term.

All comparisons between Study 1 and Study 2 results must be viewed in light of the enormous changes that occurred in the global political situation during that period, particularly the dramatic shifts in power in Eastern Europe. In 1988, students opting to take the National Security course were slightly more conservative than their control group (more supportive of SDI, more likely to rate their parents as pro-nuclear). In 1990, students in the target course were less conservative than their control counterparts (less pro-nuclear, less suspicious of the Soviet Union). It may well be that changes in the world situation are luring a new group of students into courses of this type.

In 1988, the only changes detectable as a result of the National Security course were in the patterns of correlations. Attitude shifts apparently occurred, but there were enough subjects who shifted in opposite directions to cause a masking of any mean differences. In general, there was a trend for the perceived relationships among issues to decrease over the ten-week term, indicating greater cognitive differentiation among them. That is, students entered the course viewing war, nuclear weapons, nuclear power, SDI, the Soviet Union, and other issues as monolithic. One effect of the course was to allow students to see these issues as related, but not identical.

A few mean differences were seen between pre and post assessments in the 1990 study. These can be summarized as increased trust in the intentions of the Soviet Union, decreased support for the Strategic Defense Initiative, and decreased feelings of political efficacy. An unavoidable confound,

however, was the continued major political change in Eastern Europe during the time the course was being given (January through March, 1990). In that three-month period, Lithuania voted to declare its independence, the Soviet Union instituted a multi-party system with no special privileges for the Communist Party, talk of German reunification began, Poland implemented drastic economic reforms, and the Berlin Wall started being dismantled. Approval of the Soviet Union and opposition to SDI can be seen as results of either the course or of these events. It is even possible that the rush of events produced a feeling of being carried along on the tide (there was a lot of talk in the media about the "sweep of destiny" during these weeks) and thus subjects may have been led to feel that there was little they or any other individual citizen could do to affect things.

An interesting finding was the pattern of differences between men and women in Study 2. Women tended to worry more, to believe that a nuclear war was a distinct possibility, and to view anti-war activism as a viable behavior for reducing the level of threat. Men were less likely to believe that a nuclear war would actually occur, and were more supportive of the Strategic Defense Initiative.

One possible explanation for these results is that men more than women accept the "deterrence" rationale for SDI, and so believe that a defensive nuclear shield will lower the probability of a nuclear strike by the Soviet Union. This interpretation is supported by the fact that men were more supportive of SDI than were women, but that there were no gender differences in support for nuclear weapons in general, suggesting that SDI is seen as different from other nuclear systems.

Another interpretation can be made by matching expectations with coping strategies. Those who believe nuclear disaster to be imminent (in this case, women) supported personal action to help stave it off. Development of new weapons systems, here SDI, was advocated by those who don't really believe that the weapons will ever be used. It is possible that some people see the arms race as merely posturing, so that whoever can mount the bigger bluff will win. If, on the other hand, you believe that your bluff will be called and the stakes are too high for your taste, the optimal strategy is to try to end the game.

CONCLUSIONS

This project was an attempt to evaluate the effect that a course on war and its technology has on students. Some changes in students' attitudes and thought processes did occur, although the small sample size and the outside confounds made it impossible to assess the full magnitude of the effect. It does not seem, however, that this course elicited a drastic change in the

students who took it. That may be because, as university students, their attitudes were fairly well formed and hence resistant to change. If so, we might expect more effect from peace education programs at a younger age. Another possibility, equally impossible to determine, is that discussion of national policies surrounding armed conflict opened areas of thought for students which will bear fruit months or years in the future.

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